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Back to Bedrock

The Eight Traditions of American Statecraft

Walter A. McDougall

Do Americans indeed suffer from “conceptual poverty” in their effort to construct a post-Cold War strategy?¹ Actually, no less a student of the United States than Andrei Gromyko once remarked that Americans have “too many doctrines and concepts proclaimed at different times” and so are unable to pursue “a solid, coherent, and consistent policy.” Only recall the precepts laid down in Washington’s Farewell Address and Jefferson’s inaugurals, the speeches of John Quincy Adams, the Monroe Doctrine with its Polk, Olney, and Roosevelt Corollaries, Manifest Destiny, the Open Door, Wilson’s Fourteen Points, Franklin Roosevelt’s wartime speeches and policies, Containment in all its varieties, Nixon’s détente, Carter’s Notre Dame speech, Clinton’s enlargement, and the Truman, Eisenhower,

Nixon, Carter, and Reagan Doctrines. Far from hurling the country into a state of anomie, the end of the Cold War has revealed anew the conceptual opulence that has cluttered American thinking throughout this century.

Nor does America suffer, as many pundits assume, from schizophrenia: the dichotomies often drawn between isolationism and internationalism, idealism and realism, are false. The United States has never been isolationist, and none of the above statesmen considered himself either a dopey idealist or a cold-hearted realist. All held that their doctrines were realistic *and* moral responses to the challenges America faced in their time. What is often seen as a Hegelian clash in the national discourse between theses and antitheses is actually a clash between

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Preaching America's Gospel, Puck, 1900

competing syntheses of what American values and national interests require.

A democracy composed of numerous religious and secular faiths is always at war with itself over matters of right and wrong, prudence and folly. In domestic politics its battleground is the law. In foreign policy the hallowed traditions, the holy writ, instructs the nation.

Americans have a veritable bible of foreign affairs. Its Old Testament, which dominated U.S. diplomacy in the nineteenth century, was designed to deny the world the chance to reshape America, and it canonized the traditions of America's Exceptionalism, Unilateralism, the American System, and Expansionism. Its New Testament, which has dominated U.S. diplomacy in the twentieth century, was designed to give America the chance to

reshape the world, and it canonized the traditions of Progressive Imperialism, Wilsonianism, Containment, and what one might call Global Meliorism. The first four traditions reflect the image of America as Promised Land. The New Testament traditions define America as Crusader State called to bring salvation to a world ravaged by revolution and war.

All eight traditions expressed a consensus among Americans about what constituted a moral and rational response to the threats and opportunities they encountered abroad. But whereas the Old Testament traditions were mutually supportive, the New Testament ones clashed, not only with the first four, but to some degree with each other. The decades of mortal combat against fascism and communism did not encourage meditation on

¹Jonathan Clarke, "The Conceptual Poverty of U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1993, pp. 54-66.

the contradictions in American traditions. But this juncture in world affairs—Shakespeare’s “time for frightened peace to pant”—allows Americans to revisit their history, puncture its myths, and ask anew whether the Author of history, be it Progress or Providence, commands them to change the world in order to remain true to themselves, or whether crusading abroad may drain and defile the virtues that made America great in the first place.

FOUNDING ORTHODOXIES

The first myth that must be dispelled is that American Exceptionalism had anything to do with foreign relations. American colonists believed their country was destined to be different and better than the Old World. But historians who spy in this the seeds of an idealistic vision of foreign relations that would come to full flower with Woodrow Wilson are mistaken. From the moment Benjamin Franklin sailed for Paris to seek support for independence, American statesmen played power politics, employing whatever means were required to secure what was truly exceptional about the new nation—its republican liberty at home.

Early American statesmen repeatedly resisted the temptation to pursue a genuinely new diplomacy based on pacifism, idealism, or ideology. The Continental Congress proceeded by dint of espionage, secret arms deals, and a military alliance with Louis XVI (which Franklin was pleased to betray as soon as Britain hinted at peace). Even John Adams, the Puritan of tender conscience, boasted at the conclusion of the treaty in 1783, “We were better tacticians than we imagined.” The Constitutional Convention later quarreled at length over the foreign policy

powers to be granted the executive branch. But the framers and *The Federalist* were silent on how the federal government should behave toward foreign lands and people. Foreign policy was to be the shield and sword of American Exceptionalism, not an expression of it.

During the wars of the French Revolution, Americans were deeply divided as between Britain and France. Federalists feared the spread of French radicalism to America, and Democratic Republicans feared British monarchism and plutocracy. But heated as the debates between the parties were, almost no one opposed Washington’s neutrality policy. All understood that to make foreign policy on the basis of ideology would drag the nation into wars abroad and tear it apart at home.

The United States tried to enforce with economic sanctions its neutral rights at sea during the Napoleonic wars. But when in 1812 Congress finally concluded that the nation must choose between pacifism and liberty, it voted for war against Britain. Finally, when presented with a golden opportunity to adopt a revolutionary policy in support of Latin America’s revolt against Spain, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams said no, deeming such a crusade both imprudent and immoral. America, he said in 1821, “is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion only of her own.” For to seek to export the nation’s ideals, Adams said, would involve America “beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue . . . She might become the dictress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”

The other Old Testament traditions followed in train. If the United States was to preserve its liberty, spare itself

large armies and navies, avoid becoming a pawn of stronger allies and a target of stronger enemies, and exploit Europe's conflicts to its advantage, it must practice Unilateralism (even, as in 1812, when it made war). But that in no way implied isolationism. Washington in his Farewell Address urged unilateralism precisely because the 1790s had proved that it was impossible for Americans to isolate themselves from Atlantic affairs. Washington even made allowance for alliances in case of emergency.

American isolationism is a myth. The word—which did not come into common use until the 1890s, when propagandists for empire flung it at their Mugwump critics—should be struck from Americans' vocabulary. Senators who questioned the League of Nations were not isolationist. Even the neutralists of the 1930s had little use for the term, nor was U.S. foreign policy ever isolationist. One could cite a score of nineteenth-century examples, but suffice to say that the nation that dispatched Commodore Perry to Japan was by no stretch of the imagination isolationist.

It was not enough, however, for the United States to shun political ties to Europe. It also had to ensure that Europe did not impose itself on America. The Monroe Doctrine, the fullest elaboration of the concept of an exclusively American System in the hemisphere, was drafted by John Quincy Adams for President Monroe's 1823 annual address, but it can be traced back to Washington, *The Federalist*, and Tom Paine. All sorts of myths have grown up around the doctrine, but the most important ones to dispel are that it was meant to secure Latin American independence or to clear the decks for U.S.

imperialism. By the time the doctrine was promulgated, the Latin American juntas needed no savior, and Adams spurned that role in any case. Nor did the United States have the will or the power to dominate the western hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine was meant only to deter Russia, France, and Britain from exploiting Spain's retreat to meddle in regions of concern to the United States (Oregon and Mexico, for example) or to establish a balance-of-power system in the Americas.

Nevertheless, huge swaths of North America remained undeveloped and subject to multiple claims. If the United States was to deter Europeans from filling those voids, it would have to occupy them itself. The liberty and opportunity of an exploding agricultural population depended on it. Accordingly, Expansionism was explicit in U.S. diplomacy from the moment Franklin demanded the Mississippi River as a condition of the peace settlement with the British. The diplomacy of expansion, however, was never driven by that ephemeral and romantic mood known as Manifest Destiny. President Polk (1845–49) disappointed both the idealistic and the ideological proponents of Manifest Destiny when he seized the southwest by force, spurned the temptation to annex and reform all of Mexico, and compromised American claims to the whole of Oregon. For 50 years thereafter no president even considered an ideological crusade.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY HERESIES

So what happened in 1898, when the United States suddenly embraced a Progressive Imperialism apparently at odds with all it had stood for? Most historians assume that the great aberration in need of

explaining was not the Spanish-American War, born of the bloody Cuban war for independence, but the acquisition of colonies that followed. They cite the growth of U.S. population, exports, and industry, the depression of the 1890s, and the "closing of the frontier" to argue that big business, the navy, and their political spokesmen were eager to junk isolationism and emulate European imperialism in the pursuit of foreign markets.

This story is not so much wrong as beside the point. First, 1898 could not end an isolationism that never existed. Second, it did not inaugurate overseas expansion; the United States had pursued that course ever since President Tyler draped the Monroe Doctrine over Hawaii in 1841, Secretary of State William H. Seward bought Alaska in 1867, and Grover Cleveland risked war over Samoa in the 1880s. What is more, the keepers of the nation's conscience in the Protestant churches and the Progressive movement saw nothing troubling about the little empire won in 1898 and yearned to do good to Spain's benighted subjects in the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Finally, Progressive Imperialism did not contradict Expansionism, the American System, or Unilateralism but did excellent duty by them.

The shocking novelty of 1898 is that Americans finally gave in to the crusader's temptation, and the explanation for that must be sought not only in strategy and economics but in culture. Thanks to the cresting floods of the social gospel, the Progressive movement, social Darwinism, and consciousness of the "white man's burden," the old millenarian undercurrent that had sprung from the second Great Awakening conquered the mainstream of American religious and intellectual life.

Whether inspired by biblical or Enlightenment tenets, the Founding Fathers had proceeded on the assumption of a flawed and immutable human nature. Hence they designed a government and foreign policy based on checks and balances, humility and prudence, and warned against the concentration of power in the hands of churches, factions, or ideological zealots. But as the nineteenth century galloped on, the "higher criticism" of the Bible, Darwinian evolution, and science and industry's promises of limitless progress drained the savor from mainstream Protestantism. "As Christianity turned liberal," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote in *The Cycles of American History*, "shucking off such cardinal doctrines as original sin, one more impediment was removed to belief in national virtue and perfectibility." In foreign policy, whereas America the Promised Land had held that to try to change the world was stupid (and immoral), America the Crusader State held that to refrain from trying to change the world was immoral (and stupid). Senator J. William Fulbright observed in *The Arrogance of Power* that U.S. foreign policy expressed two distinct sides of the nation's personality: "Both are characterized by a kind of moralism, but one is the morality of decent instincts tempered by the knowledge of human imperfection and the other is the morality of absolute self-assurance fired by the crusading spirit."

Wilsonianism was not a reaction against the imperialist episode but the fulfillment of it. Wilson was convinced that Anglo-Saxons had a duty to share their genius with the "childlike races." He applauded the Spanish war and colonies, and as president intervened more aggressively in the Caribbean than

Teddy Roosevelt or William Howard Taft. He told the cadets at the Naval Academy, "The idea of America is to serve humanity," and stood John Quincy Adams on his head when he pronounced it a "very perilous thing to determine the foreign policy of a nation in terms of material interest. It is not only unfair to those with whom you are dealing, but it is degrading as regards your own actions."

Accordingly, Wilson showed little interest during World War I in defending America's neutral rights, which he termed "small entanglements." All he cared about was mediating a peace without victory and promoting the agenda fashionable among British liberals, which condemned the balance of power and armaments and advocated a league of nations. Wilson reached his agonizing decision to go to war only after he persuaded himself that it would be a crusade to end war everywhere, just as the United States had made war to end war in Cuba; to teach the Germans to elect good leaders just as he had tried to teach the Mexicans; and to establish a world organization just like the Pan-American league he had previously hoped to found. Wilson's defenders saw his program as both idealistic and expressive of a "higher realism." But it offended all Americans who, while they may have endorsed certain Wilsonian principles, remained convinced of the wisdom of Unilateralism and the Monroe Doctrine. What is surprising, in fact, about the fight over the League of Nations is that senators were willing to go along with as much of Wilson's program as they did. His refusal to compromise spoiled his life's work.

Pearl Harbor established Wilsonianism as the sixth tradition of U.S. foreign policy. Americans had no other banner under

which to march into world war, and they flocked back into Wilson's tent with the zeal of repentant sinners. Wartime books and films, and the Democratic National Convention of 1944, portrayed Wilson as a martyr crucified by isolationists and promised that Franklin Roosevelt would not suffer his fate. So Americans embraced the United Nations in 1945 only to learn within months that Stalin was not the Wilsonian convert of FDR's imagination. But whereas the lessons of Munich and Pearl Harbor seemed to preclude a return to the Old Testament principles, so the deadlock at the United Nations signaled that Wilsonianism was no guide to the future.

The Truman administration had to invent and sell a new interventionist tradition—and did, with amazing success. The Senate approved the Truman Doctrine by a margin of 3 to 1, the Marshall Plan by 4 to 1, NATO by 6 to 1. While anticommunist panic played a major role, Containment also meshed well with earlier American traditions. Containment persuaded Americans that their liberty and institutions at home were under siege from a global conspiracy. Containment did not violate Unilateralism so much as may seem, because even though the United States made alliances all over the map, it was clearly the boss and so did not relinquish its freedom of action. Containment served Progressive Imperialism and Expansionism in that it validated the projection of U.S. power, opposed Soviet and European imperialism, and so protected or pried open the markets of half the world. It even served Wilsonian ends, albeit with the means of power politics.

Containment came at a heavy cost. At home, the Cold War meant peacetime

conscription, high taxes, federal intervention in science, education, business, and labor, and domestic surveillance. Abroad, Containment was vexing and wearisome. Pursued too meekly it looked like appeasement. Pursued too vigorously it risked nuclear war. Pursued moderately it sucked the United States into limited wars it dared not win or lose. But Containment not only eventuated, just as Kennan predicted, in the exhaustion of the enemy—it outlived the Cold War. “Dual containment” is U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf to this day, and some talk of the need to contain China or radical Islam. It is America’s seventh foreign policy tradition.

CRUSADER STATE

Since 1898, and especially since 1917, the United States has been in quest of practical and moral means of coping with a world beset by the revolutions that have accompanied modernization. A product of impulses that were as much cultural as geopolitical, America’s New Testament changed the goal of its foreign policy from the protection to the projection of American values. Wilson offered a legal, institutional answer. Truman offered a diplomatic and military one. Global Meliorism, the eighth U.S. tradition, is the socioeconomic and cultural answer, for it aims to make the world a better and safer place through the promotion of economic growth, human rights, and democracy.

Global Meliorism is based on the assumption that the root causes of aggression and radical ideologies are poverty, ignorance, oppression, and despair. American missionaries of the nineteenth century pioneered the use of education, medicine, and agronomy, and the promotion of

human rights to transform foreign cultures and prepare the ground for the Gospel. But the U.S. government did not get into the meliorist business to promote its secular gospel until Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover food czar for Europe during World War I. Hoover, a Quaker pacifist, pleaded for food to be shipped to the starving Germans, urged Wilson to fight Bolshevism with bread, not guns, and helped persuade American bankers to underwrite European stabilization in the 1920s.

The approach moved to the forefront of U.S. policy during World War II. Inspired by Hoover’s relief agencies, the New Deal, and Keynesian economics, Roosevelt’s brain trust established the U.N. Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank to hasten postwar recovery. Later, Americans were eager to credit U.S. military occupation with the democratization of Germany and Japan, and wondered where else Marshall Plan methods might work. The Cold War added new urgency to this American mission, and Truman’s Point Four Program drafted meliorist tactics into the war against communism. President Eisenhower was skeptical of foreign aid, but from 1956 to 1961 the Suez crisis, Sputnik, Castro’s victory in Cuba, Nixon’s disastrous tour of Latin America, and Soviet and Chinese endorsement of “wars of national liberation” forged a consensus that the United States must compete for the allegiance of the developing world. Meanwhile, the Charles River School of economists led by Walt W. Rostow developed models to show how American investment, technology, and know-how might lift any nation into “takeoff” and self-sustained growth.

Senator John F. Kennedy became a believer, and as president he quickly established the Agency for International Development, the Alliance for Progress, and the Peace Corps. But his most aggressive meliorist offensive was in South Vietnam. Granted, the commitment there grew out of the extension of Containment to Asia. But when Truman helped Greece, Turkey, Taiwan, and South Korea he did not do so on condition that those countries become model democracies overnight. JFK's advisers, by contrast, believed that state-building, economic takeoff, and the winning of hearts and minds were prerequisites for the defeat of the Vietcong. Eisenhower, thinking in terms of Containment, saw that control of Laos was the key to Southeast Asia. But Kennedy, thinking in meliorist terms, bargained away Laos in 1962, made South Vietnam a test for counterinsurgency and Third World development, and overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 because he refused to press the reforms the meliorists deemed necessary. When Diem's successors proved worse, Americans had no choice but to go in and remake the country themselves. As JFK's defense secretary, Robert McNamara, put it, if World War I was the chemists' war, and World War II the physicists' war, then Vietnam "might well have to be considered the social scientists' war."

Vietnam was the first war in history in which U.S. forces were sent not to defeat the enemy but to keep an ally from losing and to buy breathing room. In time, meliorists believed, U.S. civilian agencies working in Vietnam would build a popular regime and a prosperous country able to stand up to Hanoi on its own. That fit Lyndon Johnson's predilections perfectly,

and in Vietnam he deployed the same methods as in his war on poverty at home, acting, in the words of Harry G. Summers, Jr., "not so much as the World's Policeman as the World's Nanny." As early as February 1966 LBJ summoned South Vietnam's leaders, Nguyen Van Thieu and General Nguyen Kao Ky, to Honolulu, where he ordered them to help the Americans defeat hunger, disease, and despair, spur democracy and economic development, and win the war "by making a social revolution." This explains why the most telling critiques of the war came not from the radical left, which shared most meliorist assumptions, but from curmudgeons such as Kennan, Fulbright, Hans Morgenthau, and Walter Lippmann, who saw American tactics in Vietnam as hyperbolic presumption.

Vietnam ought to have dealt Global Meliorism a serious blow, but inasmuch as the realpolitiker Nixon, not the meliorist Johnson, presided over its denouement, the ironic result of Vietnam was that the geopoliticians went into eclipse while the American cultural mainstream embraced the most ambitious form of missionary diplomacy yet. President Carter saw human rights and foreign aid as the most effective weapons in the American arsenal, so long as they could be detached from Containment. He shed the "inordinate fear of communism" and launched a meliorist offensive *à tous azimuts*. But Carter's increase in foreign aid was devoured by OPEC-induced inflation, and his administration's rhetoric (for instance, damning U.S. allies as "retrograde fascists" and "racist states") only harmed U.S. prestige. When the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 drove Carter back to

Containment, his meliorist secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, resigned in protest.

One can argue that Carter's embarrassments were a necessary stage in America's education, for they made possible the Reagan administration's synthesis of a geopolitically based Containment overlaid with feisty Wilsonian rhetoric. As the memoirs of the time attest, the Reaganites feared that a collapse of Containment might leave the United States genuinely isolated in a hostile world: the city on a hill under siege. Reagan's insight, whether born of calculation or intuition, was that the true virtue and power of Wilsonianism was not as a model for world peace but as an ideological weapon of war against tyranny. Reagan's optimistic blend of rhetorical militancy and operational caution (his use of force being confined to Grenada and, by proxy, Afghanistan and El Salvador) confused friend and foe but served to encourage the reforms by which Mikhail Gorbachev hoped to save, and ended up wrecking, the Soviet empire.

The boons that occurred on the watches of Presidents Reagan and Bush were, however, no guide for their successors. On the contrary, the disappearance of geopolitical threats persuaded the Clinton administration, staffed as it was with Carter veterans such as National Security Adviser Anthony Lake and Secretary of State Warren Christopher, that Meliorism's moment had arrived. Their doctrines of enlargement, assertive multilateralism, and state-building vastly expanded the goals of U.S. policy at a time when U.S. military and economic resources were flagging, and in any case pleased almost no one.

Conservatives noted that Clinton seemed eager to intervene only when U.S. interests were not engaged and criticized him for turning foreign policy into a branch of social work. Jimmy Carter, noting that the United States sent 20,000 soldiers to Bosnia while ignoring Africa's holocausts, called Clinton's policies racist. Pacific Rim leaders denounced enlargement as a form of imperialism and claimed superiority for Asian values. Europeans and Asians resented U.S. demands that they dismantle trade barriers. American lectures on re-productive issues offended Muslims and Catholics, the U.S. environmental agenda vexed developing nations, and U.S. attempts to halt the spread of nuclear and missile technology angered nations jealous of their sovereign right to self-defense. To all it seemed that an administration that extolled multiculturalism and diversity at home had little tolerance for them where other countries were concerned. Ironically, Clinton's mentor from his home state of Arkansas, J. William Fulbright, had been the sharpest questioner of America's ability "to create stability where there is chaos, the will to fight where there is defeatism, democracy where there is no tradition of it, and honest government where corruption is almost a way of life."²

Americans today seem at a loss. Global Meliorism either does not work or is beyond the country's means, but the only well-articulated alternative—Containment—happily seems unnecessary. Conceptual opulence parading as variations on the themes composed by Wilson

²Donald S. Spencer, *The Carter Implosion: Jimmy Carter and the Amateur Style of Diplomacy*, New York: Praeger, 1988, p. 5.

and Theodore Roosevelt has been little help, either because post-Cold War doctrinaires neglect the real progress American values have made abroad or because they mistake prudence for an isolationism that never was. It is time to return to first principles.

THE THIRD AMERICAN CENTURY

Which of the hallowed traditions remain valid, which may yet be useful if certain mistakes of the past are avoided, and which ought to be discarded forever? Let us command them to do an about-face and parade in review.

Global Meliorism rests on the conviction that most of the phenomena that threaten U.S. security are products of oppression and poverty, and that a wise foreign policy will attack causes rather than symptoms. Meliorism assumes that the United States possesses the power, prestige, technology, wealth, and altruism needed to reform whole nations, and that the U.S. government, having democratized Germany and Japan, rebuilt Europe, and presided over an unprecedented era of democratization and growth, knows how to uplift the poor and oppressed. Finally, it assumes that Americans want to dedicate their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to that purpose.

None of these postulates is proven; every one may be false. The link between poverty and oppression, war and revolution, seems plausible, but not all beggars become criminals, nor do all authoritarian countries threaten their neighbors. What is more, if democracy merely means elections or majority rule, there is nothing

inherently decent about it. Nor can one assume that all nations walk the same road toward democratic politics and prosperity. Even if they do, to act on that assumption is to ape the Bolsheviks, who claimed that scientific law was moving the world toward communism but behaved as though history needed their "help." As for foreign aid, the London School of Economics' recent study of 92 nations found that "no relationship exists between the levels of aid and rates of growth in recipient countries" and that government aid tends to discourage removal of barriers to private investment while "increasing the size of recipient governments and lining the pockets of elites."³

The United States ought simply to close its meliorist shop and either abolish its do-gooder agencies or redefine them as tools of the national interest, not of global reform. If nations in Asia, Africa, or the former communist world need capital, let their governments respect property, establish the rule of law, enforce contracts and commercial conventions, and adjust tax rates so as to attract private investors. If they do not want to take those steps, the United States cannot force them or take those steps for them.

Containment has been the most successful twentieth-century tradition because it is based on the Old Testament principle that the integrity of the American experiment requires that a balance of power prevail in Europe and East Asia. Containment's origins can be traced back to the diffusion of industrial power across Europe and to Russia and Japan, which undermined the nineteenth-century

³*Forbes*, March 11, 1996, p. 193. Economist Peter Boone directed the study for the National Bureau of Economic Research.

balance. Americans were slow to appreciate the dangers this posed, and Wilson only clouded their judgment by casting the country's entry into World War I as a moral rather than a geopolitical act. But the failure of Wilsonianism after both world wars persuaded Americans that it is better to defend the balance of power before war breaks out.

Are geopolitics relevant now that the Cold War is over? Would not a continuation of the NATO and Japanese alliances beyond the emergency for which they were made violate Washington's great rule? In Washington's day, the European powers could be trusted to maintain their balance, and no Asian threat existed. Today, U.S. power is a vital factor in the European and Pacific equations. In Washington's day, the United States was inevitably junior partner in any alliance. Today, it is the senior partner, and need not relinquish its freedom to act or not act. Thus U.S. alliances might be thought of less as violations of Unilateralism than as extensions of the American System to the opposite shores of America's oceans.

No one can deny that the United States' Cold War career was painfully mixed. Maintaining deterrence was expensive and dangerous, Containment in Asia landed American troops in two tortuous wars, and the fight for the Third World led the United States to attempt hothouse revolutions in some countries and to consort with "friendly tyrants" in others. That is why America should not whisper "containment" with respect to China unless and until it has no other choice. The purpose of Containment is not to contest the rise of new powers but to buttress the balance that served so well from 1776 to 1917.

That modest definition of Containment contrasts with the vanity of Wilsonianism, not as fighting faith but as design for living. Wilsonianism views human conflict as an expungeable byproduct of greed, militarism, oppression, secret diplomacy, and idolatrous worship of the balance of power. Wilson imagined a world born again as a democratic league practicing disarmament, free trade, arbitration, and collective security. Of those tenets, freedom of trade and open seelanes remain vital interests that the U.S. Navy alone can defend. Wilson's "open covenants" did not survive the first week of his own conference, disarmament is the quickest way for the United States to lose its friends and encourage its enemies, and self-determination (as Wilson's secretary of state, Robert Lansing, predicted) is a Pandora's box that spews forth new horrors to this day. Finally, however much Wilson fudged the fact, the League of Nations implied an abridgment of the unilateralism that most Americans still cherish. Wilson's dream, as Henry Kissinger rightly notes, has even less of a chance in the era to come, since the ranks of the major powers may soon include Russia, China, India, Japan, Indonesia, Iran, and Nigeria, none of which has a tradition of Western jurisprudence. In historical perspective, Wilsonianism may well come to be seen as the product of one narrow strain of turn-of-the-century, Anglo-American, Progressive, Protestant thought.

That is not to say the United Nations is without merit. U.N. agencies administer regimes for the oceans, outer space, and telecommunications, and do good works in fields ranging from health to peacekeeping. But do they perform those

tasks more efficiently—or less so—for being under the U.N. umbrella? The question is worth asking, case by case.

Progressive Imperialism is a complicated affair since it arose on the cusp between America's two Testaments. To the extent that U.S. imperialism was a moral crusade it deserves the censure it usually receives: the American colonial record is pathetic. But the geopolitical principle of U.S. imperialism was sound. Progressives ranging from Teddy Roosevelt to Herbert Croly, Wilson's publicist, knew that if U.S. interests in the Caribbean and the Pacific were to remain secure in the technological twentieth century, the United States must build a great fleet, acquire bases and coaling stations, guard the approaches to Panama, and ensure that local instability gave outside powers no pretext to trespass. Judging by the Bush and Clinton defenses of their actions in Panama and Haiti, the Roosevelt Corollary is accepted today. Americans still have a keen interest in policing their neighborhood, not least because the most immediate challenges to the nation's borders take the form of illegal immigration and drug smuggling.

Not that states go around nowadays annexing whatever isles look strategic—that sort of imperialism is taboo. But even if the United States no longer grows territorially, the principle behind Expansionism is valid. It warned that unless opportunities grow for Americans, their politics must degenerate into fights over a finite pie. In the nineteenth century, new farmland had to be found. In the early twentieth century, markets had to be found at home but also abroad for American manufactures. After 1945, an open and prosperous world economy had to rise from the wreckage of depression and war.

The 21st century may call for “vertical expansion” into outer space, “invisible expansion” through cyberspace, or “submarine expansion” to mine and farm the seabed. But it will certainly require new and more secure markets abroad. The Clinton administration was right to make expansion of trade—NAFTA above all—a major goal. It erred only in believing that geoeconomics has replaced geopolitics. All economic activity, from a corner store in the Bronx to a multinational enterprise based in Hong Kong, depends on a predictable security environment.

NAFTA, in turn, demonstrates that the tradition of an American System is by no means dead. Let a hostile China court friends and build bases in Central America, or a rearmed Japan slip its moorings and meddle in South America, or a hostile Muslim state sponsor terrorism in the Americas, and the Monroe Doctrine (under whatever euphemism it goes by) will be back on the president's desk.

Unilateralism has been under a barrage because internationalists brand as isolationist anyone who sees virtue in it. Recommendations that the United States pare back its commitments in the wake of the Cold War deserve to be debated on their merits, bearing in mind Washington's and Jefferson's definitions of alliances that are “entangling”: those that would impinge on U.S. sovereignty, harm its interests, or restrict its freedom of action. Do NATO, the Japanese alliance, the Organization of American States, or the informal tie with Israel harm U.S. interests, sovereignty, and freedom of action, or do they strengthen them against dangerous foreign contingencies? If these associations are harmful, they should be abolished. If, on the other hand, they serve national interests without

compromising sovereignty, then how do they violate Washington's rule?

Which brings us to the original tradition that all the others were meant to serve: liberty at home. America's Old Testament prophets taught that foreign policy based on pacifism, ideology, or crusading zeal, far from being idealistic, was immoral and risky. Anti-Federalists feared that any federal establishment strong enough to defend America against the likes of Britain or France might threaten the liberty of Americans. They were right to worry, for the federal government has asked citizens to pay an enormous price in lives, liberty, and property to support the crusades of this century. That is why many Americans, rather than feeling puffed up by the collapse of the Soviet Union, brooded on "the end of the American dream." That is why Asians and Muslims laugh at the notion that "decadent" America could be a model for them. The beginning of wisdom is remembering that American Exceptionalism was originally conceived of as a measure of all that Americans *are*, not what they *do* far away.

The first American century in foreign relations commenced in 1797, after Washington's Farewell Address. The second began in 1897 with the inauguration of William McKinley. The third begins in 1997, when the Clinton administration must shed its hopes for a meliorist, Wilsonian world. In choosing other blueprints for U.S. foreign policy, American leaders and citizens should measure the ambitions of their New Testament traditions against the yardstick of humility bequeathed by the Old. And as the world approaches the millennium, they should lay aside millenarianism once and for all. ❷

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